

# Find Your Slovak Roots Online

by Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A.

The Internet has quickly become a popular research tool for genealogists. Over the past three years the “online genealogy” phenomenon has taken off with both large and small Web sites containing information on just about any family history or genealogy topic you desire (with more than two million genealogy-related Web sites, and counting!). There have been major site launches. For example, the Web site for the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (LDS) <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> in 1999, and more recently, the Ellis Island Records site <[www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)> in 2001 (both sites had so many visitors in the first days of availability that the servers became overloaded and the sites nearly impossible to access). The practice of using the Web for research has also been perpetuated by other such popular sites as Cyndi’s List <[www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com)>, which at the printing of this article boasted more than 120,450 links. Family history-oriented sites such as Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)> and government sites, such as the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <[www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)> are other frequently visited sites. For those researching for their Slovak roots, there are many useful Web sites both for the novice and more experienced researcher.

When I began doing research for my first book, *Three Slovak Women*, Gateway Press, Inc. 2001 (ISBN: 0-9710637-0-2), the World Wide Web was in its early stages and not much information was available online. So I had to do my detective work the old fashioned way – making numerous trips to the library to order, read and copy microfilm of village and census records, passenger lists and the like, and spending a large amount of time writing away for records and waiting for the answers to come back via regular mail. While there is something to be said for the sense of accomplishment I felt each time a new piece of requested information was returned, I have come to appreciate the advantage of using the computer and the Internet to help streamline many of the initial steps involved in intensive genealogical research.

As any avid genealogist would attest, you are never really “done” when it comes to researching your

family history. There is always a new relative to find or a juicy tidbit about an ancestor to discover. I like to think of genealogy as more of a life-long adventure. Once you start, you just want to keep going. The same applies to doing research online—once you see what is out there, you’ll feel compelled to keep exploring!

When I wrote my book, I was looking for specific information on a focused part of my family—my grandmother on my mother’s side—but in the process picked up leads and previously unknown information about the other “branches” of my family tree that I promised to explore more thoroughly someday. So, thinking that there’s no time like the present, I’ve picked up the scent again and have gone in search of additional information about my ancestors. Having the convenience of the Internet has really helped me in my quest. For myself, I’ve found that the Ellis Island, LDS and Ancestry.com sites have proven the most fruitful for the information I am seeking. I have successfully found the passenger list records and ship’s manifests for all four of my grandparents on the Ellis Island Web site, as well as those for some elusive relatives I previously had no information about. The site requires you to register as a “user” (registration is free) in order to access passenger records during a “Passenger Search,” save searches, passenger records, ship manifests and images in “Your Ellis Island File.” If you sign up for a one-year foundation membership (minimum donation of \$45) you can take full advantage of some of the other features on the site such as creating and maintaining a “family history scrapbook,” annotating passenger records in the Community Archives and more. In performing my search, I had to try variations on the spellings of names and villages but eventually I found what I was searching for (of course, I am fortunate because all of these relatives came through Ellis Island when they immigrated). For those whose ancestors came through other ports, you will have to be patient until these records are eventually merged into the Ellis Island database. However, I did experience some inconsistencies on the site; For example, upon finding a passenger list record for one of my ancestors, I attempted to view the original manifest sheet, but when I clicked on the link, a totally different manifest list (for a totally different ship) appeared for the record I was viewing. Needless to say, this was a bit frustrating, but I appreciate that mistakes are bound to occur given the large amount of data that has been and continues to be inputted for this site. On the LDS site, was able to locate film numbers by clicking on the family history

library catalog tab and doing a place search and a film/fiche search for church records in my ancestors' towns in Slovakia (including the newly released 1869 census for Spiš (Szepes) County that includes my grandfather's village, Osturňa). Once I had a printout of the numbers, it was just a quick trip to my local Family History Center (FHC) to order the films.

Ancestry.com is a site that has proven useful for me as well. While some of the databases on the site can be searched for free such as the Social Security Death Index, phone and address lists and ancestry world tree entries), you must sign up for a subscription to access some of the more detailed databases (such as birth, marriage or death records, census indexes or military records). There are different levels of membership at Ancestry.com (with subscription rates ranging from about \$24.95 billed quarterly or \$69.95 billed annually for basic membership, to \$129.85 for a super subscription billed annually), so it is a good idea to do some checking before signing up. Ancestry offers a 30-day trial (guest) membership, which lets you evaluate the site initially without paying the subscription fee. It is a good idea to try such sites out first to see if they contain information about the names for which you are searching, and also to see if there are other sites where you can locate the information without being charged for access.

Finally, anyone eager to research ancestors who came from Slovakia should check out an extremely informative article, "Slovak and Rusyn Roots: Getting Started," written by John Hudik (FEEFHS, 1996) <[www.feefhs.org/socslav/hudick1.html](http://www.feefhs.org/socslav/hudick1.html)> which provides information on various topics such as: Determining the village of origin, locating towns in Slovakia (including maps), information on genealogy research publications and how to search for Mormon Church records, census records, passenger lists, naturalization records, Czech and Slovak State Archive Records, as well as guides for writing letters to the ancestral village, doing research in Europe and other helpful guidelines for conducting research.

Some other sites particularly useful to anyone with Slavic ancestry include:

It's All Relative Genealogy <[www.iarerelative.com](http://www.iarerelative.com)>

Slovakia.org <[www.slovakia.org](http://www.slovakia.org)>

The National Slovak Society <[www.nssusa.org](http://www.nssusa.org)>

Cyndi's List—Czech Republic & Slovakia

<[www.cyndislist.com/czech.htm](http://www.cyndislist.com/czech.htm)>

National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library

<[www.ncsml.org](http://www.ncsml.org)>

Those searching for Czech or Rusyn roots (as well as Slovak roots) should read the recent article by "The Other Europe," Allison Stacy in the February 2002 issue of Family Tree Magazine. The article contains tips, pictures of old and present day maps of Eastern Europe and a comprehensive list of Web sites for researching Eastern European roots.

And, of course, remember to check out the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International site <[www.cgsi.org](http://www.cgsi.org)>.

Many researchers from the "old school" may resist the idea of online research, and some novices have the incorrect impression that all they have to do is sit down at the computer and type in a name in a search engine, and *Voila*, their genealogy will magically appear. I like to think that online genealogy complements traditional research. There are many advantages to for using the computer and the Internet. For example, the World Wide Web is a great source of information to help you complete your "research puzzle." Many documents are now in digitized format and accessible online (passenger lists, census records, etc.). Indexed sites (like Cyndi's list) provide leads for finding elusive information, or tell you where the best place is to locate a particular record. Another benefit is that via the Web one can reach others around the world doing similar research. The computer is a great networking tool. Features such as electronic mail, chat rooms, message boards, and family Web pages, offer a global forum for contacting others who share your surname, place or village of origin or other genealogical interests.

Now, a word of caution: Using the Internet *does not* replace traditional research (contrary to popular belief, most records are not yet online).

The Internet helps you build upon the foundation of your research. Ideally, online research should work in tandem with other documents and sources you discover along the way while putting together your family history "puzzle." In addition, several key sources for your family's history *must* be found in places other than the Internet (for example, actual copies of birth, death, marriage records, etc.). While Ancestry.com whose "Images Online™" project offers large collections of scanned documents online (such as the Civil War Pension Index from files 1861-1934, and U.S. Federal Census schedules from 1790-1920), many of the names in their online databases come from secondary sources. Keeping this in mind, it is a good idea to find, view and obtain the records or documents that

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correspond with the ancestor or event you are trying to record. Plus, there is something irreplaceable about touching an original document or photograph belonging to one of your ancestors, or hearing their story in their own words through oral history. Such genuine feelings of familial connection are difficult to obtain through a computer monitor.

While viewing images online will enable you to get closer to original records, a combination of traditional and online research is probably the best course to ensure accuracy and thoroughness in your search.

For those just starting to use the Internet, there are some useful guidelines to follow. Before you sign on it is good first decide what it is you want to find out (be as specific as possible – my father's side of the family – his mother or father, etc.). Next, determine what you already know. Search family records, check bibles, boxes, photo albums, etc., and, if possible, take a trip to the place your family/relative(s) lived and visit the local courthouses, libraries, and other relevant locations. Take pictures or videotape of people, places and records (if permitted), and remember to make photocopies of every record. Don't expect to rely on your memory or your notes, but try to document whatever you can, either in handwritten charts or by using the commercial software program of your choice. Finally, interviewing living relatives and others who may be able to give you some leads about your ancestor(s) can provide valuable in-depth details not usually found in ordinary records. Now, make a list of what you don't know, and any contradictory information and then note where you might find the answers.

It is also important to learn the difference between "free" and "pay for access" sites/databases before you begin searching for information. In general, access to information on government sites is typically free (although you will still have to pay for photocopies of original records or films ordered). Many of the "index" sites (like Cyndi's List) are also free. Unfortunately, due to the economic downturns of many dot.com companies and the tech industry in general, many genealogy-related sites are following the path of other Web sites, such as e-mail providers and Web hosting sites, of making you pay for services that used to be free. Free information is still out there, but you may have to look a bit harder and be more selective about the sites that you visit.

Don't be surprised if you end up spending hours, days or weeks searching various sites. The key is not to be afraid to explore. Once you've found information

that is useful either print a copy of the page, or where possible, save a copy of the record to your hard drive. At the very least, you will want to "mark" the page you visited so that you can easily get back to it again (Click on the Bookmarks command and "Add Bookmarks" if using Netscape as your Web browser or the Favorites command and "Add Page to Favorites" if using Microsoft Internet Explorer). Also, don't assume everything you find on the Internet or via e-mail is gospel. Just as one often finds mistakes in original records or traditional research, errors or inconsistencies also occur in online postings, so it is always essential to cross-check all of your sources.

Finally, don't stop there. The key to successful online searching is to keep going back – even to the sites you visit often. The Internet is a dynamic medium, one that is constantly changing. New information comes Online every day and you could be pleasantly surprised to find a new detail, record or family connection that was not there the last time you looked.

## Some Helpful References

- ♦ *Genealogy Online for Dummies*, Matthew L. Helm and April Leigh Helm. IDG Books, Inc, 1998.
- ♦ *The Everything Online Genealogy Book*. Pat Richley. Adams Media, 2001.
- ♦ *Family Tree Magazine*, F & W Publications. April 2002.

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